



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session Mary Birmingham

SIN & GRACE



The Fall of Adam and Eve: Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld; Woodcut for “Die Bibel in Bildern,” 1860. Public domain.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.



Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that is best suited for your particular group.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the *Breaking Open the Word* worksheet for this week.

Catholic Faith, Life & Creed Version 2.0

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT
Rev. Steven Olds
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR
† Most Rev. John Noonan
Bishop of Orlando

June 27, 2011

Editors: Bill Huebsch, Diana Macalintal, & Nick Wagner

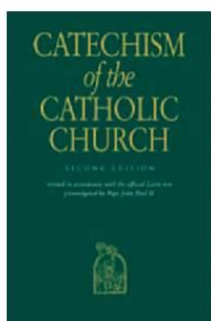
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Sharing Human Experience

Catechist leads participants in a small group sharing. Break into small groups (three or four). Remind participants to make time for all in the group to respond to the questions.

- ▶ What is your definition of sin?
- ▶ Some sins we commit over and over again. Have you ever tried to stop making the same mistakes or sins over and over only to be frustrated by your efforts?
- ▶ What does that teach you about the nature of sin?



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to 1849-1851 and 1854-1864.

- ▶ In a broad sense sin is any behavior or action that prevents a person from growing in intimate relationship with God.
- ▶ Sin is an offense against God.
- ▶ Sin ruptures our relationship with God.
- ▶ Sin turns us away from God's love.
- ▶ When Adam and Eve committed the first sin, they passed the potential for sin on to future descendants for all generations.
- ▶ The inherited inclination to sin is called original sin.
- ▶ Adam and Eve disobeyed God and chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They wanted to be like God. In their hubris, they wanted to determine for themselves what constituted good and what constituted evil. They wanted to overshadow God's own authority.

See Appendix #1 for a biblical interpretation of the origin of sin in the Book of Genesis.



Artist anonymous. The Lord Confronts the Disobedience of Adam & Eve;
The Expulsion from Paradise Nave Mosaics from Palatine Chapel, Palermo, Sicily.
Mid-12th Century. Public domain

Catechist continues:

- ▶ The writers of Genesis understood sin as love of self more than love of God. Taken to an extreme, sin is contempt for God and complete rejection of him.
- ▶ Sin is a failure of human relationships and failure of the people's relationship with God. In the Old Testament, such failure was based on the failure to live up to the covenant God forged with people. In the covenant, God took the initiative and promised to love, care for and provide for human beings. In return, human beings promised to love God with heart, mind and, soul and love neighbor as much as self. Failure to live according to the covenant is a rupture of humanity's relationship with God.
- ▶ Jesus not only came to forge a new covenant through the sacrifice of his life and to save a sinful, broken humanity, he showed us a different way to live in the world. He demonstrated humble obedience to his Father's will.
- ▶ Sin is at its pinnacle in the story of Jesus' passion. The sins of betrayal, revenge, cowardice, mockery, extreme brutality, lack of respect for the human person, murder, hatred, and denial of the Christ stand in stark contrast to the very action that was set in motion to conquer sin once and for all—Jesus death and resurrection.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question with one other person. Catechist responds and then invites a parishioner to do the same. See the appendix for an example. Invite participants to share general impressions and insights with the wider group.

- ▶ Have you ever been aware that your behavior put you outside (or could put you outside if you continued with it) of God's friendship and company?

Types of Sin

- ▶ The letter to the Galatians in Scripture names different types of sin: fornication, impurity, licentiousness (lacking moral restraint), idolatry, sorcery, enmity (deep-seated, often mutual hatred), strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing,
- ▶ Sins are committed when a person recognizes an action as evil and, in complete freedom, chooses to commit the evil action.
- ▶ Sin can be divided into mortal and venial categories.
- ▶ Mortal sins are understood as deadly offenses, grave matter. An example of mortal sin is premeditated murder. Mortal sin is a complete and total break between the sinner and God. Without genuine contrition, sorrow for the sin, and absolution in the sacrament of reconciliation, mortal sin deeply wounds the soul, making life with God impossible.
- ▶ Venial sins are less serious sins. But if they accumulate, they also can rupture a person's ongoing relationship with God (CCC, 1854-1864).

Mortal sin

- ▶ What makes a sin mortal?
- ▶ The action must be a serious, grave action; it must be entered into with full knowledge and deliberate consent.
- ▶ When a person consciously sins against God's commandments, especially those of serious degree, love is destroyed in that person's heart.
- ▶ The Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the degree of the offense determine grave matter. For a sin to be mortal, the person must understand the grave nature of the sin. The person must freely choose to commit the offense knowing the gravity of it. To pretend ignorance of the offense or to claim to have a hard heart simply increases the reality that one entered into the sin freely; that it was a voluntary choice.
- ▶ However, if a person, through no fault of his or her own, is ignorant of the grave nature of the offense, it does diminish the culpability of mortal sin while not altogether removing it. Every person possesses a conscience, and the moral law is inherently etched on every person's conscience. For example, everyone instinctively knows that murder is a heinous offense.
- ▶ Extreme passions and feelings can also diminish the voluntary nature of a mortal offense. In other words, such passion or feelings might diminish a person's capacity to make a free choice.
- ▶ External pressures and pathological disorders such as mental illness also diminish a person's ability to make a free choice.

- ▶ The worst form of mortal sin is sin that is committed through hatred and malice. *Malice* is a legal term that refers to the intentional doing of a wrongful act without just cause—the intention to do evil. A deliberate choice.

In sum

- ▶ A sin is mortal when the person knows the action is serious, a grave action.
- ▶ A sin is mortal when the person knows that their action means they are cut off from God.
- ▶ A sin is mortal when the person consciously knows all the above and with complete freedom of choice chooses to do it anyway.
- ▶ Human freedom always presents two options: love or refusal to love.
- ▶ Mortal sin cuts us off from God's grace and from eternal life. It excludes us from the kingdom of God until such time as the person seeks God's forgiveness. However, "we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God" (CCC, #1861) so we do not know the eternal outcome of any person's situation.
- ▶ Even though we can judge an act to be grave, it is not up to us to judge whether the sin was mortal for another person. That is between God and the sinner.
- ▶ The sinner is in God's hands.
- ▶ Mortal sin is forgiven by true sorrow and contrition for sin and the sacrament of reconciliation.
- ▶ A person in the state of mortal sin is required to express sincere sorrow and contrition for sin, promise not to repeat the sin, make reparation when possible, and receive absolution in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Catechist shares a story to illustrate the points made. See appendix #2.

Venial Sin

- ▶ Venial sins are the less serious sins we commit.
- ▶ Venial sin weakens our ability to love as God intended.
- ▶ Venial sin can create an unhealthy desire for material goods.
- ▶ Venial sin keeps people from growing in virtue.
- ▶ Deliberate, unrepentant, and continued venial sin eventually can evolve into mortal sinfulness.
- ▶ Venial sin does not cut us off from God's love.
- ▶ Venial sin does not break the covenant that exists between God and the human person.
- ▶ We continue to receive God's grace even when we commit venial sins.
- ▶ Venial sin is forgiven by true sorrow for sin, participation in the Eucharist or the sacrament of reconciliation
- ▶ One frequently asked question about the sacrament of reconciliation is, "How often must one celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation?" Catholics are required to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation only if they have mortal sins to confess. The Church requires Catholics to celebrate the sacrament at least once a year. However, since this sacrament is more about God's incredible mercy than it

is about sin, why would we not avail ourselves of this incredible gift of compassion and forgiveness as often as possible? A good practice would be to celebrate the sacrament monthly, thus strengthening the penitent to avoid the habit of venial sin and its effects.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in the wider group.

- ▶ What sins are so serious, so grave, that prohibition against them is written on the human conscience?
- ▶ Considering the conditions for a sin to be mortally sinful, in your opinion how easy or difficult is it to commit such a sin?
- ▶ What are some common venial sins, sins that we barely give notice to, but which are nevertheless destructive?
- ▶ Deliberate, unrepentant, and habitual venial sins can evolve into mortal sins. Can you think of an occasion where this might be the case? See appendix #3.
- ▶ Can you imagine any minor sins (venial) that left unchecked in your own life could grow to be out of control? What about the effects of gossip?

The Unforgivable Sin

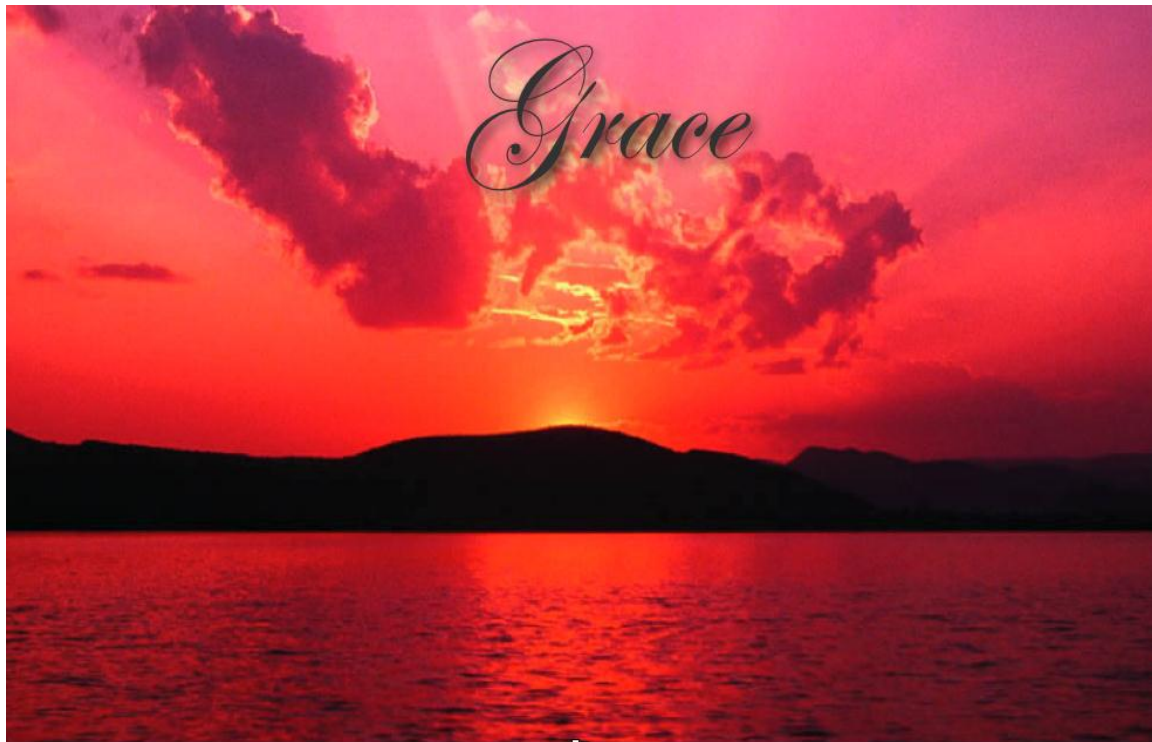
- ▶ The Bible tells us that the unforgivable sin is sin against the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that those who deliberately choose to cut themselves off from God's love, to reject salvation, to harden their hearts to God's indwelling make it unlikely that they will be open to repentance, reconciliation with God and ultimately salvation.
- ▶ In other words, a person's habitual rejection of God creates a hardness of heart that makes it nearly impossible for the person to be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and thus open one's heart to conversion and repentance and eternal salvation (CCC 1864).

Capital sins

- ▶ These sins are called *capital* because they lead to other sins and other vices.
- ▶ They are: pride, greed, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth.

Social Sin

- ▶ Social sin is the accumulation of personal sins against groups of people; sins against groups of people that keep them oppressed and marginalized.
- ▶ "Sin and its effects are visible everywhere: in exploitive relationships, loveless families, unjust social structures and policies, crimes by and against individuals and against creation, the oppression of the weak and the manipulation of the vulnerable, explosive tensions among nations and among ideological, racial and religious groups, and social classes, the scandalous gulf between those who waste goods and resources, and those who live and die amid depravation and underdevelopment, wars and preparation for war. Sin is a reality in the world" (*National Catechetical Directory*, #98).



Grace

- ▶ The focus on sin requires that hope always has the last word.
- ▶ Our God is merciful.
- ▶ God always seeks out the sinner.
- ▶ The antidote to sin is grace.
- ▶ The grace of which we speak is Christ himself and the sacrifice of his life to save us from sin.
- ▶ Christ, in the words of St. Paul, became sin; that is, he willingly became a human being and entered the sinful human condition even though he himself was without sin.
- ▶ He walked in our shoes; he experienced first hand the frustrations of human life. He showed us a way when there was no way. He brought hope and embodied God's own salvific will for the human race.
- ▶ God does need us; we need God. God does not need our praise; we need to praise God.
- ▶ God's complete and total gratuitous love, mercy, and forgiveness is the antidote to sin. How blessed we are!
- ▶ We are given the Beatitudes as our guide. We can do no less than respond in love in the manner Jesus' exhorted us to respond. We are to consider ourselves blessed in poverty, blessed in hunger, tearful and joyful over persecution. We are to be confident that we will be filled, blessed and satisfied. Such is the grace of God.

- ▶ Scripture is an anecdotal history of people who sinned and people who subsequently repented. God extended mercy and welcomed and accepted them back in his company. They sinned again and the cycle continued generation after generation. Little has changed.
- ▶ People repeatedly broke their covenant relationship with God, and God repeatedly restored what was lost and broken.
- ▶ Yet little else needs to be said other than, “There is no sin greater than the power of the risen Christ.”
- ▶ God takes the initiative to forgive sins.
- ▶ We choose either to accept his initiative or reject it.
- ▶ We were given the freedom to choose.
- ▶ God invites us to choose love, to choose God.
- ▶ We are given the grace to make that choice.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question and then share general insights with the wider group.

- ▶ Consider your life in Christ. Do you seriously grapple and struggle with the sin in your life or do you ignore it or make excuses for it?
- ▶ In what way have you observed the sin in your life impacting your relationship with God and with those closest to you?
- ▶ In what way is grace operative in your life when it comes to sin and your efforts to avoid it?
- ▶ In what way does this teaching on sin and grace have anything to do with your life right now?



Community Connections

Liturgy, Scripture, and doctrine challenge us to transform our lives so that we can go out and help transform the world.

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity and makes arrangements of group participation. The Rite of Penance tells us that we are strengthened to avoid sin by participating in acts of justice and charity. There are several opportunities in our parish for such participation: the homeless shelter, the social concerns ministry, the food pantry. The invitation this week is to offer the stewardship of your time in one of those ministries.



Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following challenge by sharing with one other person.

- ▶ All of our teachings invite a faith-filled response from us. What one thing are you willing to commit to do this week as a result of this liturgy and the teaching on sin?
- ▶ Perhaps commit to participating in one of the Spiritual or Corporal Works of Mercy. The Rite of Penance insists that such acts have the power to strengthen us against the temptation to sin and indeed cover a multitude of sins.
- ▶ Is there a person in your life that you consistently sin against? What would it take for you to offer the olive branch of peace and reconciliation to that person?

Corporal Works of Mercy

Corporal Works of Mercy are those that tend to bodily needs.

Feed the hungry
Give drink to the thirsty
Clothe the naked
Shelter the homeless
Visit the imprisoned
Visit the sick
Bury the dead

Spiritual Works of Mercy

The Spiritual Works of Mercy provide for the needs of the spirit.

Admonish the sinner
Instruct the ignorant
Counsel the doubtful
Comfort the sorrowful
Bear wrongs patiently
Forgive all injuries
Pray for the living and the dead

Journal

Write in your journal through the week: What are the primary habits of sin you would like to ask God help you avoid?



Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions, Doxology (“Glory be to the Father...”), a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA #90-97.

Option 2: Intercessions, Doxology, Opening Prayer B: #39, Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions, Sacramentary.

ACT OF CONTRITION

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.

In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good,

I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things.

I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance,

to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.

Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us.

In his name, my God, have mercy.

Appendix

#1. Interpretation of Genesis and the Origin of Sin

- ▶ Humanity's saga of sin, repentance and conversion was first explored in the book of Genesis. Human beings were God's creation, precious and holy, made in God's image. Yet, they turned away from their reliance on God. Humanity destroyed the Shalom peace and harmony intended for the world and given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. As a result of their sin, Adam and Eve disrupted the peace that was intended by God when God created the heavens and the earth.
- ▶ Sin denies our need for God. Through sin, we rupture the covenant relationship that God established with us. Humanity sought to become that which God did not intend. Nevertheless, God in his infinite mercy and love for his creation placed man and woman at the center of God's plan for the salvation of the world. Genesis invites us to reflect upon the implications of that reality.
- ▶ The author's use of the name *Adam* was a reference to and was understood as "Everyman." When we meditate upon the wisdom of Genesis, we cannot help but place ourselves in the person of Adam, every person. Adam's story is our story.
- ▶ We are to be cautious in laying blame for Adam's first sin at the feet of Eve. St. Paul does not even mention her. He places blame squarely upon Adam's shoulders. Each human being bears the responsibility for his or her own sins. A person chooses to sin. God is not to blame. Our parents are not to blame. Blame rests solely on the shoulders of the sinner. Sin is a free choice. The more we choose sin, the more difficult it is to turn away from it. The more we choose the habit of sin, the more difficult it is to choose the habit of grace.
- ▶ More than simply an awareness of Adam and Eve's sexuality, their nakedness in the garden was an awareness of their sinfulness, their shame. What exactly was their sin? Adam and Eve chose to believe they could become like God. They could be as powerful and omnipotent as God. What arrogance! They already enjoyed complete happiness, and a committed relationship with God, but they succumbed to temptation and chose their own stubborn will, arrogance, and glorification over God's sovereignty.
- ▶ All was not lost, however. Scriptures testify to God's mercy and reason for hope. Just as humanity chose to sin, through the grace of God they could similarly choose to repent. God in his mercy would forgive them. Human beings could turn from their idolatrous, arrogant ways and remember the covenant God had forged with human beings.
- ▶ Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden (there were consequences for their

sin), but they would not be eternally damned. God planned to save the world through the Incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ.

- The Genesis story is a story of hope in the reconciling mercy of God in the face of human sinfulness. “This is why the meditation over the origin of sin and its entrance into the world is not followed by a song of lament and mourning, but by a psalm of repentance, that is, a confession of the Lord’s merciful love, a song of humble trust and hope: ‘Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned’” (Mary Birmingham, *Word and Worship Year A, Lent 1*, Paulist Press).

#2. Story

A dear friend was accused of embezzling money, killing the person who could testify against her, then taking her own life. Everyone was certain she was in hell. Many people called the diocese and were angry over the fact that she was given a Christian burial. The diocese reminded them that we are not to judge a person’s life by one action but rather by the totality of a person’s life. In truth, we are not to judge at all. That is up to God. They rightly entrusted her to the care of God’s bountiful mercy.

#3. Story

The woman in the story above started her life of embezzlement by requesting company funds for purchases for her clients. She would ask for \$20.00. She spent \$4.00 of the money on a client and kept \$16.00 for herself. Before her life of crime ended, she had embezzled over \$100,000. The entire affair ended in murder, bloodshed, and suicide.

Sin and Grace Handout

- ▶ In a broad sense sin is any behavior or action that prevents a person from growing in intimate relationship with God.
- ▶ Sin is an offense against God.
- ▶ Sin ruptures our relationship with God.
- ▶ Sin turns us away from God's love.
- ▶ When Adam and Eve committed the first sin, they passed the potential for sin on to future descendants for all generations.
- ▶ The inherited inclination to sin is called original sin.
- ▶ Adam and Eve disobeyed God and chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They wanted to be like God. In their hubris, they wanted to determine for themselves what constituted good and what constituted evil. They wanted to overshadow God's own authority.
- ▶ The writers of Genesis understood sin as love of self more than love of God. Taken to an extreme, sin is contempt for God and complete rejection of him.
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- ▶ Jesus not only came to forge a new covenant through the sacrifice of his life and to save a sinful, broken humanity, he showed us a different way to live in the world. He demonstrated humble obedience to his Father's will.
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Types of Sin

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making life with God impossible.

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Mortal sin

- ▶ What makes a sin mortal?
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In sum

- ▶ A sin is mortal when the person knows the action is serious, a grave action.
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- ▶ Venial sin can create an unhealthy desire for material goods.
- ▶ Venial sin keeps people from growing in virtue.
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- ▶ Venial sin is forgiven by true sorrow for sin, participation in the Eucharist or the sacrament of reconciliation
- ▶ One frequently asked question about the sacrament of reconciliation is, "How often must one celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation?" Catholics are required to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation only if they have mortal sins to confess. The Church requires Catholics to celebrate the sacrament at least once a year. However, since this sacrament is more about God's incredible mercy than it is about sin, why would we not avail ourselves of this incredible gift of compassion and forgiveness as often as possible? A good practice would be to celebrate the sacrament monthly, thus strengthening the penitent to avoid the habit of venial sin and its effects.

The Unforgivable Sin

- ▶ The Bible tells us that the unforgivable sin is sin against the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that those who deliberately choose to cut themselves off from God's love, to reject salvation, to harden their hearts to God's indwelling make it unlikely that they will be open to repentance, reconciliation with God and ultimately salvation.
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Grace

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- ▶ God does need us; we need God. God does not need our praise; we need to praise God.
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- ▶ God takes the initiative to forgive sins. We choose either to accept his initiative or reject it. We were given the freedom to choose.
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